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AUTHOR Milstein, Mike M.
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ABSTRACT

The intent of this paper is to clarify the meaning of the "plateauing" of educators and its effects as a unique form of career stall. Initial definitions are followed by a summary of a presentation of and literature on plateauing and some preliminary findings about the extent of plateauing among educators and how they try to cope with it. Three forms of plateauing are defined: structural, content, and life. Identified are the results and findings of a survey designed to test whether results of plateauing studies in business and industrial settings are also applicable to educational settings. Findings indicated that plateauing is most likely to affect educators who are in well-defined positions for 4 or more years and those who are older. A survey was designed and administered to 216 respondents from several groups of teachers and administrators attending professional development programs in New Mexico. Survey results parallel those in the literature: individuals who judge themselves to be plateaued will also likely perceive themselves to work fewer hours and be absent more frequently. The last section is devoted to analysis of coping mechanisms. Appended are 11 references and 5 data tables. (SI)

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PLATEAUING AS AN OCCUPATIONAL PHENOMENON AMONG TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

Mike M. Milstein
Department of Educational Administration
University of New Mexico

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PLATEAUING AS AN OCCUPATIONAL PHENOMENON AMONG TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

Mike M. Milstein
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There has been a growing interest in business organizations over the past decade about a unique form of career stall. This phenomenon, which is referred to as plateauing, can occur if one has been in a long period of work stablity. Stability can be comforting and we may actually seek it out, but over time it can lead to a sense of sameness and stagnation. If we perceive that our jobs are replete with routine and repetitive tasks or that we are blocked from desired promotions, we are likely to feel an intrinsic sense of loss and become skeptical about ever finding fulfillment in our careers; i.e., we will be plateaued.

Teachers and administrators are as susceptible to plateauing as are managers and workers in industry. In fact, in some ways they may be more susceptible. Many of us choose education as a career because we believe there will be opportunities to achieve growth and professional status. However, it is not long before we realize that we are in a "front loaded" occupation (Lortie, 1975); i.e., we obtain professional privileges and advantageous

working conditions when we first come into the profession, but these privileges and conditions are not likely to improve noticeably over time. We may try to find ways out of this bind by such responses as changing schools; seeking promotions which, if attained, can delay the feeling of being plateaued; channeling our energies toward our family and social relationships; or leaving the profession.

As noted, the longer we remain in a job, the more likely we are to plateau. Over the past twenty five years we have become a highly senior profession. An early 1960s survey (Chambers, 1970) showed only 35 percent of the teachers studied being in the classroom after four years. By 1972 a similar study (Mark and Anderson, 1978) found 59 percent of the teachers surveyed remaining in the classroom beyond the fourth year. By 1984 Harris (1984) found that median classroom experience was 12.7 years. Further, attrition rates among teachers are presently low, particularly among those in the 30-55 year old range (Grissmer and Kirby, 1987), indicating that most remain and try to cope with plateauing as best they can.

The point is that, given the demographics of our work

force, plateauing is probably a greater problem now than in the past. Further, it is as much an issue for educational organizations as it is for the teachers and administrators who experience it. We may remain competent--i.e., do an adequate job, but if we conclude that our jobs are rote, routine and uninteresting and that there is not much likelihood that there will be opportunities for learning and growth, our attitudes and our productivity will inevitably be affected negatively.

The intent of the paper is to clarify the meaning of plateauing and how it can affect us. After initial definitions, the literature on plateauing will be summarized and some preliminary findings about the extent of educator plateauing and how they try to cope with it will be presented.

The Essence of Plateauing

A physical plateau is a flat expanse of land that extends for a long distance. In human terms, a plateau represents a long period of stability, which is a goal most of us strive to achieve. For some it may provide continuing satisfaction but, as noted, after some individually-defined time span stability begins to feel more like sameness and stagnation for many of us.

(Bardwick, 1986) identifies three forms of plateauing:

Structural plateauing, which occurs when promotions are viewed as unobtainable. This is inevitable, given the hierarchical pyramids found in complex organizations. There is, as Levinson (1978) notes, only room at the top for a few; about one in twenty executives who seek promotion to the top of their organizations will make it. The rest will get little or nothing. Similarly, Bardwick (1986) states that only about one in ten who are qualified for promotion will even make it to middle management ranks and that only one in one hundred will make it to the top;

Content plateauing, which sets in when there is a sense that there is little or no challenge left in one's job. If we think that there is nothing new to be learned it is inevitable that a feeling of routine and boredom will be encountered: "The information we have says that it is difficult to have a sense of learning if your work remains essentially the same for more than three years. Most complex jobs are mastered in that time. If we expand the number of years from three to five, in order to account for the different time clocks in people's heads, then that tells us how long it usually takes for the sense of mastery to be replaced by the feeling of boredom if work is static"(Bardwick, 1986, p. 74). However, content plateauing, unlike structural plateauing, is not inevitable: "No one ever knows everything; no one has ever done everything. There are no limits to change and challenge except those created by personal fear or organizational laziness" (Bardwick, 1986, p.7).

Life plateauing, which represents an over-all sense of routine and sameness about all aspects of life. Life plateauing, although beyond the scope of the paper, is important for policy makers to recognize because it affects how individuals respond to work situations.

Characteristics of Plateaued Employees

Caution is necessary when drawing conclusions regarding plateaued employees because research concerning plateauing is limited to business and industrial firms and even that research has only been going on for the past decade. However, there are some consistent findings that identify employees who have the potential for plateauing as:

1. Those in well-defined positions for more than five years (Bardwick, 1986);
2. Older workers. Near (1984) found that 65 percent of the workers in her study who were over 40 characterized themselves as plateaued;
3. Those who work in mature, low growth organizations (Slocum, 1985);
4. Workers with lower formal education. Near (1984) found that 47 percent of the plateaued managers and 67 percent of the non-plateaued managers in her study went to college;
5. Workers who change jobs frequently early and less frequently later in their careers. Random early job changes may affect later opportunities for promotion (Orpen, 1983; Veiga, 1981).

Many teachers and administrators fit at least the first three categories, i. e., they have been in well-defined positions for many years, are older, and work in mature organizations. In short, this professional group may be particularly susceptible to plateauing.

Plateaued individuals exhibit some common characteristics. According to the literature, as compared to others, they:

1. Think of themselves as less important to their organizations, work fewer hours, are absent more frequently, and judge themselves to be in poorer health (Near, 1984);

2. Have more desire to leave their places of employment but have less confidence that they can find an alternative position that is satisfactory (Orpen, 1983; Veiga, 1981); and

3. View their supervisors less favorably. (Near, 1984).

In short, plateauing can have negative consequences. Plateaued individuals will likely experience reduced zest and, more important, a declining sense of self-worth. It is also likely that the organizations they work for will be negatively effected through poorer performance and lower productivity.

How Extensive is Plateauing Among Educators?

Literature searches failed to identify studies of educator plateauing so a survey was designed to test whether results of plateauing studies in business and industrial settings are also applicable to educational settings. The survey was developed and administered to several groups of teachers and administrators in New Mexico during the summer and fall of 1988.

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they felt plateaued generally and whether they felt structural and/or content plateaued specifically. If they responded positively to at least one of these questions, they were asked whether it affects others at work, themselves, and their friends and family. They were also asked about their absences for health reasons, satisfaction with their work situation, and feelings about their supervisors.

The 216 respondents included the faculty of an urban high school (N=78), a sample of administrators from across the same district (N=31), a group of teachers (N=38) and administrators (N=37) from small school districts across the state who were attending a professional development seminar sponsored by the New Mexico State Department of Education, and a group of administrators (N=32) attending a principals' center at the University of New Mexico. The over-all results of the survey, by respondent groups as

well as by total sample, regarding felt-level of plateauing and the affect that it is perceived to have on others and self are reported in Figures I and II. Variations according to the demographic factors of respondents' organizational level (elementary/secondary), marital status and gender are reported in Figure III and factors relating to their experience (age, time in position, and time in education) are reported in Figure IV.

General Extent of Plateauing Among Educators

As Figure I shows, plateauing is widespread. For the total sample more teachers (36%) than administrators (27%) feel plateaued . This is particularly interesting when correlated with two other responses: more administrators than teachers report spending above average time at work (76% to 60%) and feel above average satisfaction with their work (73% to 56%).

Structural plateauing is a greater problem than content plateauing for both of these groups. Across all of the sampled groups, twice as many teachers and administrators view themselves to be structurally plateaued (47%) than do those considering themselves to be content

plateaued (23%). Over-all, teachers feel structurally plateaued more extensively than do administrators (58% to 34%). Education, as a relatively-flat hierarachical system, offers few promotion opportunities for administrators, but for teachers the problem is even greater. For some teachers structural plateauing may be the result of lack of opportunities to move into administration, but for many others it is probably more closely related to the front loaded career syndrome noted earlier; i.e., <u>once tenured, there is usually no career ladder to climb within teaching</u>!

Figure I Here

It is interesting to note the greater sense of plateauing on the part of urban school district educators. Both groups report much higher feelings of plateauing than do other responding teachers and administrators. The fact that they work in larger, more complex bureaucracies than do other administrators and teachers in the sample may account for at least part of the differences in their

responses. It is also possible that the lower perception of plateauing reported by the teachers and administrators who attended either the state department of education's workshop or the principals center has to do with internal motivation. Specifically, these respondents had to take some initiative in the form of effort, expenditure of funds, giving of time and a desire to do something different to attend these special seminars. The point is that they were voluntarily, and at some cost to themselves, making the choice to grow and stay vital professionally. These educators were intuitively seeking ways of avoiding plateauing, or at least of blunting the effects of it.

Effect on Others and Self*

Several important findings regarding the impact of plateauing should be noted. First, those who responded to these questions believe that being plateaued affects themselves (60%) and their family and friends (50%) more

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*Figure II does not include principal center respondents because no data regarding effects on others were collected from administrators attending the principals center.

than it does other adults (45%) and students (35%) in their schools. Second, as might be expected, within the school, teachers think that plateauing has about the same effect on students (35%) and their organization (38%), whereas administrators feel that being plateaued has a much greater impact on the over-all organization (63%) than it does on students (34%).

Figure II Here

In summary, many teachers and administrators who responded to the survey perceive themselves to be plateaued (36% of all teachers and 27% percent of all administrators) and they are able to distinguish between the kinds of plateauing that they are experiencing (58% of the teachers and 34% of the administrators feel structurally plateaued, while only 25% of the teachers and 19% of the administrators feel content plateaued). Further, they recognize that plateauing has an impact on themselves, their family and friends and, to a lesser degree, those they work with, and the students they serve.

Demographic Variations

Figures III and IV summarize the data according to key demographic variables. As Figure III illustrates, school level, marital status and, to a lesser extent, gender relate to perceptions of plateauing. Specifically, less frequency of plateauing, greater work-related satisfaction, spending more time at work and being absent less frequently is reported by respondents who are elementary educators, married, or female than by secondary educators, those not married or males.

Figure III Here

Time on task and age also seem to be important factors. As Figure IV indicates, the demographic variables of age, years as an educator and years in present position directly affect perceptions of plateauing. Those in their twenties are less than half as likely to feel plateaued as those in their fifties; veteran educators (ten or more years in the field) are eight or nine times as likely to feel plateaued as those in their first three years in the field; and those in a position for ten or more years are four times as likely to feel plateaued as those in a

position for three years or less. The same directionality, though less skewed, holds true for structural and content plateauing.

With a few exceptions, the results indicate that those respondents who are younger, have been in education fewer years and in a position for less time perceive themselves to spend more time at work, be more satisfied, be absent less frequently, and have more favorable attitudes toward their supervisors. However, over-all there is some curvilinearity to the configuration; i.e., those who survive as educators past their middle years tend to come to some form of peace with their situation and perceptions of plateauing, time at work, satisfaction and attitude towards supervisors are moderated.

Survey Results and Literature Trends

The findings reported herein should be viewed tentatively, given the limited geographical setting of those surveyed, the developmental nature of the survey instrument and the relatively short amount of time that this phenomenon has been studied.

However, there is high consistency of survey outcomes with the findings summarized earlier regarding business

and industrial settings. Two of the characteristics of plateaued employees identified by the literature were tested in the survey and found to be applicable to responding educators. Specifically, plateauing is most likely to impact educators who are in well-defined positions for four or more years and those who are older. Further, survey results parallel those in the literature which indicate that individuals who judge themselves to be plateaued will also likely perceive themselves to work fewer hours and be absent more frequently.

How Teachers and Administrators Cope With Plateauing

Respondents who identified themselves as plateaued (general, structural or content) were asked to describe how they cope with this phenomenon. Most of them were able to identify one or more specific coping mechanisms that they use. Analysis of responses led to the development of five coping categories, which are summarized in Figure V.

Figure V Here

Most frequently noted were coping techniques that related to **staying within one's current role, but trying to make it more challenging and rewarding**. New activities, new methods, trying to be more creative and, for teachers, focusing more intensively on students, led responses in this category. Second, were responses focusing on **personal activities**, particularly exercise, hobbies and attitude modification. Personal activities were quite varied. **Professional development activities**, ranked third, focused heavily on further education--formal classes, reading, and workshops. **Changing jobs**, which ranked fourth, showed a strong teacher response towards changing organizational level, classes and/or subjects. Ranked last was **increased involvement at the organizational level**, with administrators most interested in organizational improvement and teachers most interested in being on committees and being involved in extra-curricular activities.

These qualitative responses show a profile of educators who, for the most part, want to stay in their roles but are seeking ways of making them more interesting and challenging by changing the ways they perform their

responsibilities as well as by gaining more knowledge and skills through various professional development strategies. Even when they contemplate changing jobs, it is almost always within the profession rather than leaving education. They also recognize the need to balance professional and personal lives to offset the plateauing they encounter in their jobs, but only a few are interested in extensive activities at the organizational level.

In Closing

The intent of this exploratory paper has been to stimulate a dialogue about plateauing and the problems it creates for educational oranizations and the individuals who work in them. It is an important phenomenon and one to which both individuals and organizations can and should be more responsive. The lack of analysis concerning educator plateauing and the impact it may be having upon the ability of teachers and administrators to function effectively are sufficient reasons for researchers to examine it closely.

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FIGURE I

Teachers and Administrators Experiencing Plateauing

Respondents	Am I Plateaued		Am I Structually Plateaued		Am I Content Plateaued	
	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %
All Teachers (N=116)	36	64	58	42	25	75
Sub-Groups:						
Urban High School Faculty (N=78)	41	59	55	45	31	69
State Dept. of Education Workshop Teacher Participants (N=38)	26	74	58	42	16	84
All Administrators (N=100)	27	73	34	66	19	81
Sub-Groups:						
Urban School District Administrators (N=31)	52	48	68	32	32	68
State Dept. of Education Workshop Administration Participants (N=37)	22	78	22	78	19	81
Principals Center (N=32)	16	84	28	72	6	94
Total Sample (N=216)	32	68	47	53	23	77

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FIGURE II

Who Does My Plateauing Affect?*

Respondents	People I Work With		Students		My Organization		Me		My Family & Friends	
	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %
All Teachers	38	62	35	65	38	62	66	34	44	56
Sub-Groups:										
Urban High School Faculty	35	65	34	66	33	67	65	35	42	58
State Dept. of Education Workshop Teacher Participants	43	57	38	62	50	50	71	29	48	52
All Administrators	64	36	34	66	63	37	71	29	64	36
Sub-Groups:										
Urban High School Admin.	38	62	45	55	46	54	59	41	55	45
State Dept. of Education Workshop Admin. Participants	69	31	28	72	65	35	59	41	53	47
Total Sample	45	55	35	65	45	55	60	40	50	50

* Those who responded positively to any of the plateauing questions (summarized in Figure I) were asked to identify those who are affected.

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FIGURE III

Plateauing by Selected Demographics: Level, Marital status and Gender

Demographic Categories	Am I Plateaued Yes %	Am I Plateaued No %	Am I Structurally Plateaued Yes %	Am I Structurally Plateaued No %	Am I Content Plateaued Yes %	Am I Content Plateaued No %	Time Spent At Work Below Avg. %	Time Spent At Work Avg. %	Time Spent At Work Above Avg. %	Days Absent for Health Reasons 1-3,4-7,8-10,11+	Satisfaction with Work Below Avg. %	Satisfaction with Work Avg. %	Satisfaction with Work Above Avg. %	Feelings About Supervisors Favorable %	Feelings About Supervisors Unfavorable %
Level															
Elementary (N=50)	22	78	43	57	10	90	0	21	79	87 11 2 0	5	21	74	82	18
Secondary (N=113)	35	65	44	56	24	76	2	45	55	78 22 0 0	4	37	59	93	7
Marital Status															
Single (N=40)	34	66	49	51	17	83	0	35	65	75 23 2 0	12	33	55	91	9
Married (N=144)	29	71	42	58	18	82	2	25	73	84 15 1 0	3	28	68	87	13
Other (N=16)	48	52	48	52	38	62	0	52	48	75 25 0 0	5	38	57	86	14
Gender															
Female (N=120)	29	71	42	58	18	82	1	27	72	81 18 1 0	5	26	69	85	15
Male (N=80)	35	65	47	53	23	77	1	36	63	82 17 2 0	5	38	57	92	8

FIGURE IV

Educator Plateauing by Selected Demographics: Age, Years as Educator and Years in Present Position

Demographic Categories	Am I Plateaued		Am I Structurally Plateaued		Am I Content Plateaued		Time Spent At Work			Days Absent for Health Reasons				Satisfaction with Work			Feelings About Supervisors	
	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %	Below Avg. %	Avg. %	Above Avg. %	1-3 %	4-7 %	8-10 %	11+ %	Below Avg. %	Avg. %	Above Avg. %	Favorable %	Unfavorable %
Age																		
20-30 (N=14)	21	79	25	75	14	86	0	36	64	79	21	0	0	0	29	71	100	0
31-40 (N=80)	26	74	39	61	16	84	2	41	58	78	21	1	0	3	32	65	84	16
41-50 (N=76)	35	65	46	54	17	83	0	31	69	81	18	1	0	8	33	59	87	13
51-60 (N=29)	45	55	57	43	41	59	0	27	73	90	10	0	0	0	26	74	94	6
Years as Educator																		
1-3 (N=19)	5	95	10	90	0	100	5	38	57	79	21	0	0	0	38	62	100	0
4-6 (N=47)	13	87	54	46	14	86	0	20	80	73	27	0	0	0	27	73	100	0
7-9 (N=16)	16	84	42	58	10	90	0	19	81	83	17	0	0	0	13	87	76	24
10-15 (N=53)	40	60	46	54	16	84	0	29	71	86	14	0	0	4	33	63	89	11
15+ (N=82)	44	56	49	51	32	68	1	35	64	79	19	2	0	9	35	56	87	13
Years in Present Pos.																		
1-3 (N=94)	15	85	31	69	8	92	0	25	75	83	15	2	0	6	25	69	89	11
4-6 (N=47)	33	67	49	51	21	79	0	30	70	79	21	0	0	2	31	67	89	11
7-9 (N=29)	54	46	63	37	35	65	4	27	69	79	21	0	0	4	40	56	75	25
10-15 (N=35)	65	35	64	36	44	56	0	43	57	75	25	0	0	5	41	54	95	5

FIGURE V

Ways Teachers and Administrators Cope with Plateauing

Category	Rank	Times Noted by Teachers	Times Noted by Administrators	Coping Techniques:	Teachers	Administrators
Modifying my present position	1 N=84	50	34	New proj./Diff.things	10	16
				New approaches/methods	11	0
				Be creative	8	8
				Focus on the kids	8	0
				Dev. support groups	6	0
				Seek excellence	2	1
				Other*	6	6
Personal activities	2 N=81	45	36	Exercise	5	5
				Hobbies	5	6
				Attitude modification	4	5
				Travel	0	5
				Outside activities	4	0
				Extra jobs	4	0
				Life style changes	3	1
				Prayer	3	1
				Drinking	0	2
				Reading	1	2
				Other *	16	9
Professional development activities	3 N=62	38	24	Continuing education	10	7
				Reading prof. lit.	8	1
				Workshops	5	4
				Exchange ideas	4	2
				Conferences	3	0
				Prof. org. activities	2	3
				Courses in other fields	2	0
				Encourage teacher growth	0	5
				Other *	4	2
Change jobs	4 N=33	18	15	Change levels/ classes/subjects	12	0
				Change jobs within education	1	4
				Change schools	3	2
				Climb the ladder	0	3
				Change careers	2	2
				Move every 3 years	0	2
				Other *	0	2
Organizational involvement	5 N=25	20	5	Extra work roles	4	0
				Improve the organ.	0	4
				Get on committees	4	0
				Talk with principal	2	0
				Seek challenges	2	0
				Other *	3	6

"Other" techniques are those that were only mentioned once.